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Coventry experiments with a nursery centre

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*Background studies on day care
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When interviews were held for a headteacher and deputy head for the new Hillfields Nursery Centre in Coventry, the managing body did not merely include city council members; they had four local residents as well.

Community involvement in this project, which opened a year ago, has been a vital component from the start.

Hillfields is a typical inner city re-development zone. Old working class neighbourhoods of terraced houses are being demolished. High rise flats and a new shopping centre are gradually taking their place.

Coventry was not included under the first phase of the Government's urban aid programme, but in February, 1969, the city was given the go-ahead to build a nursery school and a day nursery under the second phase.

Mrs M. W. Farmer, adviser on primary and nursery schools in Coventry, felt that these two separate units should be housed under one roof. Such a plan naturally involved delicate administrative questions, since day nurseries were the responsibility of the health department (now social services department) and nursery schools come under the education department.

Decisions had to be made about which department would administer the centre. Would a matron or a headteacher be in charge? Would nursery assistants work in just one section or both (those in the day nursery part would have longer hours and shorter holidays)? Would the centre be free like nursery schools or would it impose a scale of charges?

It took months to reach agreement. In the end it was decided that the two parts would be run as one integrated unit—hence the decision to call it a nursery centre rather than a day nursery or nursery school. It was also agreed that the education department would administer the centre, and that a headteacher not a matron would be in charge.

"The health department insisted quite rightly that the head should be someone with nursery school experience", said Mrs Farmer.

The decision to place administrative responsibility with the education department was influenced by the knowledge that most children would fall in the three to five nursery school part. The centre plans allowed the equivalent of 100 full-time children: 10 babies, 20 toddlers and 70 "mature" under-fives.

However, there is full cooperation with the social services department. They are represented on the managing body and local health visitors are in constant touch.

Besides the headteacher, Mrs Margaret Johnson, there is a deputy head, one other qualified teacher, a senior nursery nurse and 12 nursery assistants who hold NNEB, SRN or other similar qualifications.

The city council did not make all the decisions about the nature of the service to be provided by the £65,000 centre. At about the same time as the second phase of urban aid was announced in February, 1969, Coventry was invited to take part in a national experiment in community development. Hillfields was also chosen as the focus for this project and close cooperation developed between the two.

"We had agreed from the beginning that the centre should meet the needs of the locality," said Mrs Farmer.

The only way to discover these needs was to ask. So a public meeting was held in the area to discuss the centre. Primary school heads invited all parents to it and the information shop of the community development project and health visitors helped to spread the word.

About 80 people attended and the meeting was able to nominate a group of 12 local residents to advise the centre on important practical points such as hours of opening, priorities for admission and charges.

Three of the group were appointed to the management committee.

The advisory group asked for the centre to be open from 7 am (half an hour earlier than the day nurseries) to 6 pm. These hours were accepted.

Not all the children attend for the whole of this time. There are really three categories: those who do the full day, those who do a full nursery school day (about 9-4 pm) and part-timers who attend either for a morning or an afternoon.

Charges for attendance presented a problem. The advisory group felt that it should not be completely free. Since the centre was going to be open 40 weeks a year and provide breakfast, lunch and tea, it could not be categorized as a nursery school. They argued that everyone should make a contribution.


It was decided that part-timers should pay 50p a week, nine to four children £1.25, and full-timers £2.50. Reductions are possible for those in special need, and several children attend free.

One strict stipulation is that only children from the area known as the Hillfields triangle can be accepted and even children of staff are not allowed places unless they live in the area.

But even within Hillfields not every child can be admitted and there are 160 on the waiting list. Some parents, especially Asian immigrants, try to put their children on the list when they are only a few months old.

Deciding priorities is difficult for the headmistress. She uses the broad categories of need set out by the advisory group. The largest single category are children from one parent families. "Eighty per cent of the full-timers come from broken homes", she said.

Then there are the children who merely need space to play. They may live in the new flats or come from a large family with restricted living space and no garden. Low income families, those where little English is spoken and those with a handicapped child are also included.



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Mrs Johnson said she had added to the list of priorities families in which both parents were working, and where the mother was doing a socially useful job such as nursing.

Most of the children who arrive at the centre have never had much space to play in, many toys or books. It is a strange experience for them to be suddenly faced with large open play areas, Wendy houses, quiet rooms for reading, and outside grass, sandpit and a little "orchard" of apple trees.

"It takes about three months for most of them to settle down" said Mrs Johnson. She has observed a typical pattern of behaviour. On arrival they tend to be withdrawn and apathetic, taking little part in activities—some even try to crawl under the fence and escape. This gives way to a destructive phase when they let loose and enjoy all the space they never had before.

"Then, gradually, we start to see good results," she said. "They begin to play and talk to one another. We also see physical improvement, because they are getting balanced diets and learning to eat salads which most have not had before."

Each child's medical records are obtained from the local clinic, so that, for example, immunising injections can be completed. The medical officer of health visits weekly and has given each child a thorough medical examination. As a result of this several have been referred to specialists for chest and eye complaints, heart murmurs and congenital disabilities.

As the centre is designed to serve a community, parental involvement in its activities is considered most important. "It is not something you can force", said Mrs Johnson. So far it has been very slow to develop.

There are obvious handicaps. Hillfields is an area with a transient population, and the turnover of children attending the centre is quite high, about 9 per cent. For many families their main idea is to save

for a deposit on a house and move out of the district as quickly as possible. A mother bringing up a family alone has little time to get involved in anything outside the home.

Still Mrs Johnson has made a start. Last term a number of mothers helped to organize a jumble sale to raise funds for the centre and after this a group began meeting in the parents' room on Wednesday afternoons.

"The same people don't come every week", she said, "but at least they know this is somewhere they can drop in for a cup of tea."

Less successful has been her attempt to start dressmaking classes. "I was rather shocked by the number of new department store clothes the children wore, since the mothers are always complaining about the cost of living. I thought if they could make their own clothes they could save a bit of money."

But this scheme had not caught on at all. "It was just my middle-class idea. In fact, they like to buy things readymade."

